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FOR PUBLIC AFFAIRS STAFF

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SUBJECT Claire Sterling

BILL KURTIS: To author Claire Sterling, the world has been strangely unmoved by the attempt to kill the Pope in 1981. Even after the arrest of Mehmet Ali Agca even after his trial, even after he had admitted being part of a conspiracy, there was no great outcry for justice. To be sure, Agca was sentenced to life in prison, but the case is still far from closed. He reenacted the crime for the Italian courts and has named names that lead Mrs. Sterling to conclude that not only has the Pope forgiven Agca, but so have the CIA and the Western governments. And in her new book "The Time of the Assassins," she claims the allies are trying to cover all this up.

As a matter of fact, you were rather strong on that subject, calling to a deception. By whom?

CLAIRE STERLING: Yes, I think it's a deception, and a sleazy deception, really, by practically all the Western powers; but most importantly, by the U.S. intelligence establishment, which has tried from the day the investigating judge in Italy arrested a Bulgarian named Antonov as a direct accomplice of Agca's, has tried to discredit Agca as a nut case, a known crazy, a fool, a compulsive liar, and has maintained, by giving information, six major articles of comments by unidentified U.S. intelligence analysts saying that there was no Bulgarian connection; or that the Bulgar -- he was working for the Bulgarians, but he didn't know he meant to kill the Pope; or they knew it and they didn't stop him, but they had nothing to do with it; or they knew it, but they didn't tell the Russians. In short, every effort was made. Within a period of five months, six major articles appeared in the American press from these unidentified intelligence analysts in Washington attempting to persuade the public that there was no such thing as a Bulgarian connection or

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any kind of Russian responsibility for this.

KURTIS: Cover-up, deception. Why? What would there be to gain?

STERLING: It's a mystery to me. I've tried to understand it. I believe there are some factors that are fairly clear. The most immediate, expedient one is that perhaps President Reagan, in the year before the election, would have wanted a summit meeting with Andropov in Russia; and Andropov was the head of the KGB, of course, when this attack was launched.

KURTIS: That would be the obvious...

STERLING: That's the obvious one.

KURTIS: But we don't seem to be making those overtures yet. And it would seem that he would want the Soviets to be held responsible.

STERLING: You would think, of course, that this Administration, which came in on a wave of hawkism, would have been delighted by this opportunity to point out the evil side, the wicked side of Soviet policy -- that is, the underside of Soviet policy. But, to the contrary, like Administration's before it, both Democratic and Republican, the establishment in Washington, as in other countries in Western Europe, is very reluctant, I think, to have any major development that would make waves. It does not want a situation that it considers destabilizing; therefore it does not want the public to know what it knows itself about the unofficial part of Soviet policy, which includes political assassination.

KURTIS: Do we know if the Pope and the Vatican subscribe to the conspiracy theory?

STERLING: Oh, I think there's no question that the Pope understands exactly what happened with the conspiracy. From the time he recovered his strength in the hospital and was able to take over the reins in the Vatican again, his newspaper, L'Osservatore Romano, has had a series of editorials making it clear that they were not content with the cover-up that began with Agca's trial that summer. There have been clear statements coming from the Pope himself and his position, most recently his meeting with Agca in prison just after Christmas, when he pointedly expressed confidence -- that was his word -- in Agca as a penitent, which meant, "I consider him a sincere penitent, and therefore his confession to the Bulgarian connection must be a sound one." That was the implication.

Yes, the Pope has made it clear.

Not everybody in the Vatican agrees. There are many forces which would prefer not to -- which would have preferred to avoid any kind of confrontation with the Soviet Union, however clear the question of guilt. But I think the Pope himself believes that that is morally unacceptable.

KURTIS: You're familiar with post-mortems on the Marine bombing, for instance, in Lebanon, and the governmental awakening to the worldwide threat of terrorism here in the United States. Do you think, as an expert on terrorism in the world today, that it's going to reach the United States?

STERLING: Yes. But, of course, it has already reached the United States very sharply abroad. We're being attacked abroad because it's easier. But I understand that there are certainly plans, well advanced, for the launch -- for extending this kind of terrorist-attack onslaught upon us inside U.S. territory.

KURTIS: A very provocative statement with only ten seconds left.

What plans, and how do you know?

STERLING: Well, I've heard about the plans in Washington and other parts of Europe. Little groups have been forming, little cells, independent cells, capable of launching spectacular bombings. It's not so difficult, if you have a good backing position to organize things for you, for a small group to wreak tremendous havoc.

KURTIS: We'll take that as a word of warning from an expert on terrorism around the world.

Thank you, Claire Sterling, very much. We wish you the best of luck on "The Time of the Assassins," your new book.